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Published on Wednesday, July 30, 2008.

Last modified on 7/30/2008 at 12:47 am

Gazette Opinion: New thinking on brucellosis control

For two decades, the battle against brucellosis has targeted Yellowstone bison. Recently, ranchers and government agencies have turned their sights on elk, too.

There are several ideas about what to do: drastically reduce the greater-Yellowstone elk population; create a separate cattle zone in Montana around the park; and develop more effective livestock vaccines and effective vaccine delivery for wildlife. Perhaps the best place to start is to update federal regulations.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Services continues to enforce draconian rules that don't necessarily fit today's brucellosis situation. If any herd in a state has one animal that tests positive, the entire state can be punished, which is now Montana's predicament. Meanwhile, the Forest Service, another USDA agency, allows Wyoming to operate elk feeding grounds, despite strong scientific consensus that the feed grounds increase brucellosis prevalence in wildlife. Such conflicting policies don't make sense.

Wyoming testing area

In four Wyoming counties adjoining Yellowstone Park, ranchers already have to test all of their cattle regularly, which is what APHIS soon may require of the whole state. If the Daniel, Wyo., rancher with 20 infected cattle opts to keep his herd instead of sending them all to slaughter, Wyoming will lose its brucellosis-free status - even though the rancher would test his stock just as APHIS would require ranchers to do statewide. It doesn't make sense to pressure a rancher to kill the whole herd when a test-and-slaughter program will eradicate the infected livestock.

Frank Galey, dean of the University of Wyoming's College of Agriculture and chairman of the state's Brucellosis Coordination Team, told the Casper Star-Tribune that suggested federal rule changes will be discussed at the group's fall meeting.

"I'm thinking, and I think the ranchers are also thinking, in this day and age when dealing with a wildlife reservoir, the major question becomes: How essential is it to depopulate?" Galey told the Casper newspaper.

Effective vaccinations

In Helena last week, Yellowstone Park Superintendent Suzanne Lewis spoke to the Montana Board of Livestock and called for:

- Finding new resources to develop effective and sustainable vaccinations for both wildlife and livestock.

- Implementing management changes that "reflect the current landscape, science and knowledge of our talented field staffs."
- Finding places where bison are welcome and present no threat to livestock to live outside the park.
- "Careful and considerate review, revision and strengthening of the regulatory framework surrounding livestock and wildlife disease management that ensure the long term sustainability of both."
- Listening to scientists, regulators, ranchers, rangers, tribes, sportsmen, conservationists and the public at large.

Such a unified, multipronged approach will be needed to make significant headway on the complex problems brucellosis poses for livestock and wildlife. A Montana Board of Livestock spokesman said the board is considering Lewis' invitation to visit Yellowstone's northern range later this summer. It's a trip worth making for a dialogue that must continue.

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